

Message Text

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ACTION EA-09

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-07

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R 100329Z AUG 77

FM AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8462

INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

AMEMBASSY CANBERRA

AMEMBASSY JAKARTA

AMEMBASSY MANILA

AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE

AMEMBASSY TOKYO

AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON

CINCPAC HONOLULU

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 KUALA LUMPUR 5249

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PBOR, MY, RP

SUBJECT: PHILIPPINE-MALAYSIAN BILATERAL RELATIONS

REF: (A) KUALA LUMPUR 5112; (B) MANILA 11316; (C) JAKARTA 9588;

(D) KUALA LUMPUR 4383

1. INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY. PRESIDENT MARCOS' ANNOUNCEMENT THAT THE PHILIPPINES WOULD TAKE STEPS TO SETTLE ITS CLAIM TO SABAH WAS A HIGH POINT OF THE ASEAN SUMMIT, A DRAMATIC POLITICAL FEATHER IN AN ECONOMICALLY UNSPECTACULAR CAP. FURTHER ASSURANCES GIVEN BY MARCOS AT A POST-SUMMIT NEWS CONFERENCE SEEM TO HAVE CONVINCED THE SKEPTICAL MALAYSIAN GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC THAT THE GOP IS SINCERE ABOUT RELINQUISHING THE CLAIM AND THAT THIS LONG-STANDING
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IRRITANT IS SOON TO BE FINALLY REMOVED. END INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY.

2. FOLLOWING PRIVATE TALKS BETWEEN MALAYSIAN PRIME MINISTER HUSSEIN ONN AND PHILIPPINE PRESIDENT FERDINAND MARCOS AUGUST 5, MARCOS ANNOUNCED AT AN AUG. 6 PRESS CONFERENCE THAT THE GOP IS DEFINITELY DROPPING ITS CLAIM

TO SABAH WITHOUT ANY CONDITIONS. ACCORDING TO THE "NEW STRAITES TIMES", MARCOS SAID: "WE DO NOT IMPOSE CONDITIONS NOR DO WE BARGAIN. WE HAVE NEVER LINKED THE WITHDRAWAL OF THE CLAIM TO ANY OTHER MATTER. WE ARE NOT TALKING OF THIS IN LIEU OF THAT OR OF COMPENSATION." ACCORDING TO OTHER PRESS REPORTS, MARCOS SAID THAT THE QUESTION OF COMPENSATION FOR THE HEIRS OF THE SULU SULTANATE HAD NOT BEEN DISCUSSED IN THE AUG. 5 TALKS. HOWEVER, MARCOS DID NOTE THAT THE GOP CLAIM TO SABAH WOULD HAVE TO "GO THROUGH PROCEDURES THAT HAD BEEN ESTABLISHED" AND THAT CERTAIN CONSTITUTIONAL, LEGAL, POLITICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL OBSTACLES WOULD HAVE TO BE ELIMINATED BEFORE THE CLAIM COULD BE CONSIDERED FINALLY WITHDRAWN. ACCORDING TO THE AUG. 7 "STAR", MARCOS ALSO SAID, "I KNOW I WILL HAVE PROBLEMS WITH POLITICAL ACTIVITIES WHEN I RETURN HOME, BUT I WILL ATTEND TO IT." DURING THE COURSE OF THE PRESS CONFERENCE, MARCOS SAID THAT THE GOP WAS PREPARED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE REHABILITATION OF THE 92,000 FILIPINO REFUGEES NOW IN SABAH. PM HUSSEIN, ALSO ASKED ON AUG. 6 ABOUT HIS TALKS WITH MARCOS, DELINED TO COMMENT, SAYING ONLY THAT THE TALKS HAD BEEN VERY GOOD. IN AN AUG. 8 PRESS CONFERENCE HUSSEIN ELABORATED ONLY SLIGHTLY, SAYING THAT ANY CLAIM SETTLEMENT WITH SABAH WAS A MATTER FOR THE SULU HEIRS TO RAISE WITH THE GOM.

3. MARCOS, HUSSEIN AND INDONESIAN PRESIDENT SUHARTO
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ISSUED A JOINT STATEMENT AUGUST 6 ANNOUNCING THEIR INTENTION TO TAKE STEPS TOWARD CONCLUDING A BORDER CROSSING AND BORDER PATROL AGREEMENT BETWEEN MALAYSIA AND THE PHILIPPINES "TO PREVENT PIRACY, SMUGGLING AND DRUG TRAFFICKING" IN THE BORJAR AREA. (THIS APPARENTLY GREW OUT OF TALKS BETWEEN MARCOS AND HUSSEIN, LATTER JOINED BY SUHARTO, THE MORNING OF AUG. 5, AND WAS REFERRED TO FOR THE FIRST TIME BY MARCOS IN HIS SPEECH AT THE CLOSING OF THE SUMMIT THAT AFTERNOON.) ALTHOUGH MARCOS STATED IN HIS AUG. 6 PRESS CONFERENCE THAT HE WAS TAKING STEPS TOWARD DROPPING THE SABAH CLAIM "WITHOUT CONDITIONS," IN REFERRING TO THE BORDER CROSSING AGREEMENT HE SAID CRYPTICALLY, "YOU CAN GUESS WHAT THIS MEANS." (COMMENT: PREVIOUS REPORTING--REFTELS B AND C--INDICATES THE GOP LOOKS ON SUCH A BORDER AGREEMENT AS DIRECTED AGAINST THE MNLF AND THUS AT LEAST A TACIT GUARANTEE BY THE GOM THAT SABAH WILL NOT BE USED AGAIN AS A SUPPORT BASE FOR THE MUSLIM REBELS. WE SURMISE THAT THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF WORKING TOWARD A BORDER AGREEMENT, COUPLED WITH THE PUBLIC DENIAL OF GOM SUPPORT TO THE FILIPINO MUSLIMS BY DEPUTY PM MAHATHIR--REFTEL D--AND BY SABAH CHIEF MINISTER HARRIS ALLEH ON HIS RECENT

TRIP TO MANILA (AND A PROBABLE PRIVATE REITERATION OF THIS POSITION BY PM HUSSEIN), CONSTITUTE SUFFICIENT QUID FOR THE GOP QUO OF RELINQUISHING THE CLAIM. IN CONTRAST WITH THE EARLIER APPARENT GOM FOOTDRAGGING ON THE BORDER CROSSING AGREEMENT, A SENIOR MFA OFFICIAL TOLD THE AMBASSADOR AUG. 6 THAT THE GOM IS VERY ENCOURAGED BY MARCOS' WILLINGNESS TO ENTER INTO JOINT BORDER CROSSING ARRANGEMENTS SINCE THIS IMPLIED A WILLINGNESS TO AGREE TO THE BORDER ITSELF. GIVEN THE DIFFICULTIES IMPOSBR BY HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY ON ANY MEANINGFUL APPLICATION OF A BORDER AGREEMENT IN THE ISLANDS OF THE MALAYSIAN-PHILIPPINE BORDER, THE GOM HAS APPARENTLY DECIDED THAT THE PSYCHOLOGICAL GAINS FROM SETTLING THE SABAH CLAIM, ESPECIALLY IN THE ASEAN CONTEXT, OUTWEIGH THE NEGATIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL

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IMPACT, BOTH ON DOMESTIC AND ISLAMIC CONFERENCE AUDIENCES, OF APPEARING TO ABANDON THEIR CO-RELIGIONISTS' CAUSE IN THE SOUTH PHILIPPINES.)

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 KUALA LUMPUR 5249

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

4. MEANWHILE, BACK IN SABAH, ACCORDING TO THE BERJAYA-CONTROLLED KOTA KINABALU "DAILY EXPRESS," VISITING FILIPINO AGRICULTURE SECRETARY ARTURO TANCO AND NATURAL RESOURCES SECRETARY JOSE J. LEIDO GAVE A MAJOR SHARE OF THE CREDIT TO HARRIS FOR "BRINGING ABOUT A NEW ERA IN PHILIPPINE-SABAH RELATIONS IN PARTICULAR AND PHILIPPINE-MALAYSIA RELATIONS IN GENERAL BY PERSUADING PRESIDENT MARCOS TO DROP THE CLAIM TO SABAH." ACCORDING TO THE AUG. 6 EDITION OF THE "DAILY EXPRESS," TANCO SAID, "THE VISIT OF DATUK HARRIS TO THE PHILIPPINES WAS THE PRECIPITATING CAUSE OF THE PHILIPPINE GOVERNMENT TO TAKE STEPS TO DROP THE CLAIM TO SABAH." TANCO ALSO DESCRIBED THE TANCO-LEIDO VISIT AS "TOKENS OF THE FACT THAT A NEW BEGINNING IS BEING MADE IN PHILIPPINE-MALAYSIA RELATIONS."

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5. EDITORIAL REACTION TO MARCOS' ANNOUNCEMENT OF TAKING STEPS TO DROP THE SABAH CLAIM HAS BEEN UNIFORMLY FULL OF PRAISE, ESPECIALLY AFTER THE AUG. 6 PRESS CONFERENCE. (SOME COMMENT HAD POINTED OUT THAT MARCOS' FIRST ANNOUNCEMENT ON THE CLAIM IN HIS OPENING ADDRESS TO THE ASEAN SUMMIT, WHILE WELCOME NEWS, WAS LESS THAN UNEQUIVOCAL. THE PRESS CONFERENCE APPARENTLY PUT SUCH DOUBTS TO REST, AT LEAST IN THE PUBLIC MIND.) EVEN FORMER PM TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN, WHO HAD EARLIER EXPRESSED RESERVATIONS ABOUT HARRIS' TRIP TO MANILA, CALLED THE SABAH ANNOUNCEMENT "MOMENTOUS AND COMPLETELY IN ACCORD WITH THE SPIRIT OF ASEAN," IN HIS AUG. 8 COLUMN IN THE "STAR."

6. COMMENT. WE HAVE NOT YET HAD A CHANGE TO TALK WITH WORKING-LEVEL GOM CONTACTS TO GAUGE THEIR PRIVATE REACTIONS TO MARCOS'S ANNOUNCEMENTS, BUT WE THINK THAT THE GOM, WHICH HAS BEEN FROM MISSOURI ON THIS SUBJECT FOR A LONG TIME, IS FINALLY CONVINCED THAT THE GOP CLAIM TO SABAH IS WELL ON ITS WAY TO A DECENT BURIAL. THERE IS UNDOUBTEDLY A NEW SPIRIT OF GOODWILL IN THE AIR, A FEELING WHICH CONTINUED THROUGH MARCOS' VISIT TO LABUAN AND KOTA KINABALU AUG. 9 AND 10. (THE LOCAL HERO OF THE PIECE, EVEN AFTER DISCOUNTING THE EXTRAVAGANT LANGUAGE OF HIS OWN NEWSPAPER, IS HARRIS SALLEH.) THE GOM IS CLEARLY RELIEVED TO BE RID, AT LAST, OF THIS LONG-STANDING IRRITANT TO BILATERAL RELATIONS AND TO ASEAN CONCORD.
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